



VIETNAMESE COMICS – FROM TRAINING TO APPROACH AND ORIENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Summary: Comics is the creation of artists and writers, in other words a combination of visual arts and literature; however, sometimes merely drawings can make viewers understand the development of the story as well as the actions of the characters. Therefore, the role of the artists in composing comics is very important. They not only are the creators but also have the ability to understand thoroughly the literary field. It was not until the last years of the twentieth century that Vietnamese comics did develop. On the one hand, it approached comic books from other countries around the world, and on the other hand, it was developed by the needs of real life. Therefore, during the war against the French colonialism, comics was illustrative and propagandic. However, it has gradually become a cultural phenomenon attracting a team of artists specializing in creating comics, especially young artists in recent years. Accompanying that development is the increase of readers as well as audiences, not only children but also all genders, all ages and all sections of society. The content of this study refers to the training of comic artists as well as the need for timely orientations to promote the strengths of the comic genre. At present, there is a great need for attention in training, approaching orientation and creative team to respond to the social environment in the modern development of audiovisual culture in Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: Vietnam, artists, Art, comics, training.

1. VIETNAMESE COMICS APPROACH FROM WORLD COMICS:

In the early 19th century, Hokusai was a famous Japanese engraver who was considered the father of the "manga" type of comics when he printed unique pictures about Japanese customs, people and landscape. In 1832 the Swiss artist Rodolphe Topffer experimented with the first comic books and published with the work *Voyages en zigzag*. In 1837, the German painter Wilhelm Buch created many humorous, short and concise comics. At the same time, there were other painters in France the artist Georges Colombe under the pen name Christophe; in Brazil the artist Angelo composed comics, mostly still in kind of separately recorded comics and images. Since 1884, the British painter Thomas had taken the initiative to put words into the balloon figure close to the form of present comics. In upcoming periods, comic books appeared in the form of private publication and printed in British, American, and French newspapers. Belgian artist drew comics about reporter Tintin with his dog Milou in the comic magazine *Petit Vingtième*. The formation and development of comics in the world had many ups and downs, appeared and exploited in a variety of genres and characters such as hero super, superman, horror, comedy, adventure or Tetsu wan Atomu (Strong Atom) associated with the Japanese manga... It must have been from the 80s of the 20th century until now that the comic genre has really become a cultural phenomenon that has an impact on the spiritual life of people in modern society.

In Vietnam, comics first appeared on the pages of newspapers such as Phong Hoa newspaper published by Tu Luc Van Doan with the character Ly Toet - Xa Xe. The drawings were entertaining, giving readers laughter and different perceptions about contemporary human life as well as Vietnamese society in the early years of the 20th century. After the 50s of the 20th century, Tien Phong newspaper presented comic pages that appealed to children with the story Bong Nhua va But Thép (Plastic Ball and Steel Pen). Since then, Vietnamese comic books has been noticed, especially the appearance of publications of Kim Dong publishing house, with the collaboration of artists Ta Thuc Binh, Huy Toan, Mai Long, Ngo Manh Lan, Ho Quang, Nguyen Bich, Phan Thong... At this stage, comic books exploited by artists were traditionally patriotic, with black-and-white illustration and in simple way to understand. However, the above images and below words were illustrated with new colors and art styles. The comic books were educationally oriented, aiming at generations of children to uphold the nation's traditional cultures through historical and fairy tales such as: Comics about the lives and revolutionary activities of the leader predecessors as Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Tran Phu illustrated by artist Phan Thong and Mai Van Nam, Tam Cam, Ong Giong, Son Tinh Thuy Tinh illustrated by artist Mai Long, De Men phieu luu ky, Ngươi dau tien len Mat Trang, Thang Bom ... were widely printed and distributed, together with other publications adapted from foreign comics such as: Hero Hes man. Particularly, there was the imprint of the influence of foreign comics from other countries, notably Doraemon, Dragon Balls of Japan, and some Chinese historical comics and novels. If Vietnamese comics was presented with simple, easy-to-understand descriptions and colors to clearly illustrate the text, then the drawing way of foreign comics was attractive with by sophisticated and vivid techniques to help readers develop lots of imagination between drawings and words. Furthermore, the content of the story had its own culture of different regions and countries, making the reader feel like being lost in a world different from where they lived. Despite such a difference, Vietnamese comic books still

had their own unique features in the artists' drawings. They were inspirational, rustic drawings in relation with folklore, Vietnamese cultural history, attracting the attention of readers, especially children. For example, in the story of De Men phieu luu ky, writer To Hoai described it by transforming into the character and childhood feeling about memories of the rural countryside. Painter Ta Huy Long had shown funny, easy-to-understand drawings to describe the image of a cricket - the symbol of courage, strength, but also extremely romance, creating love for readers. With true-but-lively color, the comics De Men phieu luu ky was still a highly aesthetical comic book that has been attracting a large number of children since being published and being reprinted many times. Over time, the publisher Kim Dong still played to its strengths with the publication of increasingly diverse kinds of comics from many different fields. The last years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century marked the birth of many comic genres aiming at education as well as timely serving the "quick read, quick view" reading culture of many people classes under the time @. The cooperation between artists and publishers has resulted in numerous publications of Vietnamese comics in the past time such as: Kim Dong Publishing House, Youth Publishing House, Mang Non Ho Chi Minh Publishing House in Ho Chi Minh City, Education Publishing House, and Arts Publishing House. If comic artists were recognized only as participants in the past, now there is a change as Vietnam has a team of artists specializing in drawing comics to serve children and adults. Typically, B.R.O group (Ho Chi Minh City) consists of young artists who share ideas with the same love for the three colors Black, Red, and Orange. With the model of cooperation between publishers and manga artists, groups and individual artists have been founded to create comics. Recently, Phan Thi Company is one of the famous distribution centers for comic books in Vietnam. They have released a series of up-to-date comic books suitable with readers' tastes as well as meeting the needs of reading comics of the majority of readers such as: Than dong dat Viet, Danh nhan dat Viet, Ty Quay, Sat thu dau mang mu, Tat den, Chi Phep ... in cooperation with B.R.O group.

Thus, thanks to the arts of composing comics in other countries around the world, typically in Japanese and Chinese, Vietnam has soon asserted separate comic arts reflecting distinct history, culture and customs and practices. Although the artist teams composing comics at the beginning were mostly amateurs, now small numbers of professional teams specializing in composing comics has been formed. It is the initial positive step signaling the development of Vietnamese comics in the near future. However, nowadays Vietnamese comics is still not considered adequate in the world's fine arts as well as in the country's fine arts when being compared to that of other countries in the world. That is because of the sporadic artist team and poor performance technique which does not catch up with modern technology in the world. The development of Vietnamese comics in the future also requires a more professional and numerous artist teams. Hence, the orientation of future development is needed for the Vietnamese comics.

2. TRAINING COMIC ARTISTS IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT IN VIETNAM:

In fact, at present there is no specialized facility for training or creating comics in Vietnam. The education system has neither a separate major specialized in composing comics nor a major code. However, comics has soon become the inspiration for many artists, especially the young ones who may have studied graphic

arts or graphic design. Artists who are passionate about comics are mostly self-taught or taking a course in the country or abroad. Most manga artists work for a specific firm where they can stay motivated and become passionate about their work in an animation studio or publisher. That means they have to cultivate, invest, train themselves to become professional manga artists by themselves. Some institutions may provide training for manga artists, even though they don't have a specific major code; they still integrate them in the training program to become comics artists.

Arena Multimedia Art Training Center (Arena Multimedia) is now a methodical training center in multimedia arts. In the training program, there are graphic fields such as: Brand identity design, Website design, and comic drawing ... comics in the field of 2D graphic design. It is known that the subject of comics is considered a formal training at intermediate level within 12 months to train learners to become illustrators. The content of this course is to apply basic knowledge of comic creation such as: Drawing comics, handling professional comic drafts, applying perspective, producing graphics, using basic Photoshop & backdrop, sketching model, writing scenario script, drawing comics in the various styles such as traditional, manga, comic... In addition, the program also offers a course on composing comics in an informal form aimed at learners who are students and art-lovers regardless of their ages to compose their own paintings. There are also people who are active in the field of communication, printing, advertising working at publishers and magazines, and want to pursue the program to improve their skills.

In Vietnam University of Fine Arts, comic creation is a subject in Department of Graphic for students studying graphic design. The subject of composing comics is for third-year students with duration of about 1 module, equivalent to 4 units of study. The lesson requirement includes 1 cover with 10 pages, flyers, and extra pages (if any). The assignment is required to be presented on hand-drawn A0 page and collected into a book revealing the composing styles of traditional and modern manga and comics.

Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts City is considered as the largest training institution in applied arts in the South. Although there is no separate training code for comics, students in Department of Graphic Arts can also learn about print topics including comics. There is a classification for students majoring in comics in Department of Graphic Arts. Upon graduation, students need to complete a project of about 60 comic pages. It can be seen that Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts City has implemented comic training in the form of a major, while other training institutions only train comics in the form of a module.

In Hue College of Arts, there is a subject of Comic composition and design for students majoring in graphic design in Department of Applied Graphics. After completing the lessons, students majoring in graphic design can choose the content of Comic design as their graduation project and present it to the council. The request for a design project for a comic work includes: Cover (front, back), 12 internal pages, flyers, and extra pages (if any). Hue College of Arts highly appreciates the importance of comic arts, because there has been more or less development orientation even though it has not yet become a form of professional training in comic creation.

In addition, the training of comics also has a number of training institutions within the limits of the subject such as: National University of Arts Education, Dong Nai College of Decorative Arts, Van Lang University in Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh University of Technology, Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts, Hanoi University of Theater and Cinema, Ho Chi Minh City University of Theater and Cinema, Hanoi University of Education in National University... At present, although these training institutions do not have a separate training code for comics, comic training has been integrated into specialized subjects for students majoring in graphic design.

With the needs of manga artists in society, the above-mentioned training institutions have made great efforts in providing training programs to develop human resources of manga artists. There have been so far positive results for the development of comic human resources in Vietnam in recent years. As comic training plays an important and decisive role in terms of quality and quantity, it is the right direction for determining the development of comic arts in Vietnam. The training of manga artists can be studied and referenced from Japanese Manga or Cartoon (USA), but more importantly, it still conserves Vietnamese modern-traditional values and cultural identity. For this reason, over the years, there have been a number of centers and institutions specialized in comic research and training in Vietnam such as: Vietnam Comics and Animation Institute in Ho Chi Minh City. Accordingly, Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts is the only training institution in Vietnam that has soon launched this specialized training roadmap. Perhaps comic training in Vietnam is still quite new that it has not been integrated into the formal training system at training institutions. At present, comic training are combined in graphic or graphic design programs in art training centers. Therefore, the current human resource for comic creation in Vietnam is still quite new, weak and lacks the means to meet the application demand in the future. Besides, there is also a demand for the development of artist teams equipped with expertise as well as understanding about comics, ready to meet the needs of social applications. Some artists who are following the path of composing comics also have concerns about the market, publishing and human resources. Painter To Chiem

shared his viewpoints: "Our comics lacks publications for adult people. The reason is that there is no preparation from composers and painters. Besides, the current comic artists can't afford a living by their profession". Painter Ta Huy Long said: "Vietnamese comics often follow the trends and genres of popular comics in the world. However, due to the limited drawing skills and comic ideas to extend the work, it is difficult to meet the reader's expectations and impress them." Painter Huu Khoa said: "The comic team in Vietnam has many good artists and a few excellent ones. In general, many artists only focus on drawings, leading to the confusion between illustrations and comics. In addition, Vietnamese comics is mostly hybrid and heterogeneous because the composers do not have standard and basic knowledge of manga, comics and traditional illustrations"; Painter Thanh Phong commented: "We have incorrect understanding about the profession of a comic artist. Our human resources is still weak in both quality and quantity". In Vietnam, there are now many publishers and book publishing companies interested in the field of Vietnamese comics. Therefore, these firms are ready to invest in promoting and publishing high-quality comic works of domestic authors. Some of these firms are Kim Dong Publishing House, Phan Thi Company, Nha Nam Company...

Thus, the human factor, specifically the comic team, plays a decisive role and importance in the development of comic creation in Vietnam today as well as in the future. There is also a need for human training from art training institutions in order to have comic teams fully equipped with professional knowledge as well as wide-and-deep understanding of this field in Vietnam. The training of comic teams, regardless of the scale or form, should be considered in order to demonstrate professionalism that is the core to create the appearance of Vietnamese comic arts. Therefore, it is time to outline the orientations for comic book creation in Vietnam in the future.

3. ORIENTATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAMESE COMICS:

Comics are not only for entertainment but also for educational purposes, having a good impact on the spirit, soul and behavior of people, especially the young generation. The process of reading words and observing, tracking the movements of the characters through drawings helps reader recognize the image of good people and nice behaviors, creates the impression of ethics and humanity. In addition to the educational function, comics also bring admiration and passion for the characters in the story, especially the long stories. The drawings in comics have the ability to go beyond the function of illustration and entertainment to bring about imagination when words cannot express. Therefore, the role of comic artists is extremely important. In addition to specialization in composing, drawing well, combining art and technology, it also requires the ability to research and understand about life issues. If artists do not learn by themselves to understand life issues such as society, economy, politics... they are incapable of composing and drawing comics. In the past, people assumed that comic books were for people who did not like to read true literature. Now this concept has been changes as multiple comic pictures also encourage or attract viewers in a voluntary manner. That is because merely humor can't build a comic book. It needs to have a plot shown through the continuation of drawings.

However, the artist teams specializing in comic book creation in Vietnam still lack adequate professionalism, skilled manipulation when being compared to the world comic proficiency. This can probably be explained and directed from the following reasons:

Firstly, in the past, Vietnam did not have the economic conditions to update advanced information. More importantly, the art schools in Vietnam have not put the matter of professional comic artist training into consideration. Therefore, this is still a large blank space needed to be implemented in art schools, including Vietnam University of Fine Arts. This means that it is necessary to create conditions for the formation of a larger-scale comic creation team. State agencies need to directly invest in cartoonists to have the opportunity to study abroad. Besides, foreign experts should be invited to share their professional practical experience in composing comics in seminars and trainings.

Secondly, Vietnam currently has not really built a comic market to attract domestic readers. Therefore, it is necessary to connect publishers and places of distribution as well as sources of information to promote the positivity of the comic genre. It is possible to build a more practical link between comic books and the educational system in schools from preschool. Watching and reading comics can be seen as an entertaining hobby after stressful studying and working hours. Comics is also a form of promoting and propagating Vietnamese culture to other countries. Hence, it should be translated, drawn more vividly and attractively to appeal more readers and viewers.

Thirdly, in order to accomplish the above-mentioned objectives, it is initially necessary to pay attention to the authorities with the timely response to the comic work of artists. Comic artists, after being trained from art schools, can become professional painters with a decent salary to work with peace of mind and copyright protection. Thus, our country can create a dedicated and professional team of comic artists in the context of globalization today. On the other hand, the connection between artists and writers as well as a team of translators and editors is absolutely necessary to create a match between

content and form, making the comic genre fair with other art industries.

CONCLUSION:

Vietnamese comics were formed later than the world, but in fact, Vietnamese comics always creates its own unique style with distinct Vietnamese cultural identity. From small illustrations in newspaper corners to stunning comic books widely distributed throughout urban and rural areas, the comic genre is becoming more and more beautiful in terms of appearance. However, while foreign comics are flooding the market, attracting many readers thanks to their "professionalism", it's time for us to give the right orientation to affirm the strength of this genre. On the other hand, cartoonist is a relatively new profession in Vietnam. It has a high potential for development, contributing to build the spiritual life of people in the new era./.

Note:

- I. Annie baron - Carvais (2006), Tu hình anh den truyện tranh, Fine Arts Information, Ho Chi Minh City, No.9 - 10, p. 40. (Documents of the training course on drawing comics organized by ACCU and Kim Dong Publishing House in 1991)

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- IV. To Ngoc Thanh (1998), Tranh truyện Viet Nam, Fine Arts Magazine No. 2, p. 39, 61.

